

American Muslims: South Asian Contributions to the Mix

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The three largest groups of Muslims in America are the African Americans, the Arabs, and the South Asians. I have argued elsewhere that, with respect to both historical and contemporary constructions of race, religion, and the nation in the United States, these three groups have had experiences more similar than different, and experiences that engage them all deeply in processes of religious and political change in America.¹ Yet the three groups are also very different, with distinct and often contrasting histories and characteristics.

I argue here that South Asian Muslims, chiefly those from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh,² have characteristics and political experiences that enable them to make major contributions to the American Muslim community. Like South Asian immigrants in general, they bring with them shared cultural characteristics and long-standing traditions of cultural pluralism in the Indian subcontinent. While the current census category is “Asian Indian,” Great Britain’s colonial empire of India included present-day India and Pakistan and Bangladesh (India and Pakistan gained their independence in 1947, and Bangladesh split off from Pakistan in 1971). Thus, before 1947, the East Indian (now Asian Indian) census category covered a wider area in terms of immigrant origins than it does now, and the South Asia term again encompasses that wider area.

The first contribution of South Asian Muslims in America comes through their early relationship to the largest single group of American Muslims, African Americans. African American Muslims constitute from 30 to 42% of the American Muslim population.³ It was African American Muslims who were the first to organize on the basis of the Islamic religion in

the U.S. in the early twentieth century (Arab immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth century were organizing on the basis of national origin rather than religion, and the majority of them were Christian). Struggling to define themselves as different and emphatically separate from the dominant Anglo and Christian culture, the evolving African American Muslim communities had little contact with old world Islam and developed their own versions of Islam. It was Muslims from South Asia, missionaries from the Ahmadiyya sect in British India, who first reached out to African American Muslims in the US in the 1920s. The Ahmadiyyas or Ahmadis brought English translations of the Quran and published the first English language Muslim magazine in America; they told the early African American groups about the five pillars of Islam and directed their attention to mainstream Sunni teachings.⁴

Given the importance of race in American history and Islam's promise of racial equality, this early connection between indigenous and immigrant Muslims in the U.S. should be a proud part of American Muslim history. Instead, it is in danger of being suppressed or erased. Today, following political decisions taken in Pakistan to declare Ahmadis non-Muslims,⁵ some South Asian Muslims reflect homeland prejudices and policies against Ahmadis in the U.S. Disavowing the Ahmadis has negative implications for contemporary immigrant Muslim relationships with the very important African American Muslim constituency, a constituency that won early legal victories that have broadened the rights of all Muslims in America.⁶ Yet there is an apparent unwillingness on the part of many immigrant Muslims to acknowledge African American Muslims fully and to work with their historical heritage.

The second contribution came in the 1980s and 90s, when Muslims from South Asia came forward as key leaders of ambitious efforts to unite all Muslims in the U.S. Earlier, as

consciousness of their common interests grew among the diverse Muslims in the U.S, it had been primarily Arab leaders who began to form Islamic and Muslim (religious and political) organizations and coalitions. Arab organizations included both Christians and Muslims, and fledgling Islamic religious organizations were founded in the 1960s and 70s by Arab Muslims, the children of earlier immigrants and foreign students coming to the U.S. But the organizations with political goals beyond the community, and even those with religious goals focused primarily within the community of Muslims, have gained greatly from new leaders, new Muslim immigrants from India and Pakistan who energized the American Muslim community.⁷

The South Asian Muslims were able to make such an impact because of their high educational and occupational qualifications and the political experience they brought from their homelands. After 1965, when the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act redressed the historic discrimination against Asians, increasing numbers of new immigrants have arrived from South Asia. Some had come in earlier decades, including small numbers of Muslims, but the 1965 Act not only vastly increased the numbers of immigrants from all of Asia, it set preferences for well-educated, professional people.⁸

The highly qualified and ambitious new South Asian Muslim immigrants contrast with Arab Muslim immigrants, also a growing group after 1965, in a number of ways. The South Asians speak many languages, but most are well educated in English. Most also share a British colonial heritage and post-independence histories that include some degree of experience with democratic political processes. The South Asian newcomers represent many religions, and religious diversity has long been an accepted feature of societies in South Asia. The subcontinental historical experience, until 1947, featured religious pluralism, and the numerically

dominant group, from India, still brings familiarity with pluralism as well as democracy (immigrants from India include Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Sikhs, and Parsis or Zoroastrians). Diversity within Islam has been striking as well in South Asia, and South Asian Muslim immigrants represent many strands of Islamic beliefs and practices, many kinds of Sunnis, Shias, and Sufis, especially from India, where Muslims are a minority today.⁹

These post-1965 South Asian immigrants have the means to import and maintain many elements of their cultural and religious traditions. The Asian Indian 1990 and 2000 census profiles give an idea of the resources of Muslims from India and Pakistan. Those immigrants born in India had the highest median household income, family income, and per capita income of any foreign-born group in the 1990 Census. In the 2000 Census, immigrants born in India had the third highest median household income (behind only South Africans and Britishers), the second highest median family income (behind South Africans), and the second highest median per capita income (behind Britishers) of foreign-born groups. In both 1990 and 2000, Asian Indians had the highest percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher and were among the highest percentages in managerial and professional fields.¹⁰ Many South Asian professionals are doctors, one estimate putting Indian doctors at more than 20,000, or nearly 4% of the nation's medical doctors. The largest ethnic body of doctors in the U.S. is the American Association of Physicians from India; there is also an Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America.¹¹

A spurt of mosque building was initiated by the post-1965 Indian and Pakistani Muslims,¹² and many post-1965 South Asian Muslim professionals have played major roles in interpreting Islamic law and establishing religious institutions and political organizations in America.¹³ Charting the national Muslim and Islamic organizations of the 1980s and 1990s

shows that Indian and Pakistani Muslims are at least equally if not more prominent than Arabs and African Americans in leadership roles, and national coalitions to mobilize the Muslim vote in both 2000 and 2004 were led by a Pakistani American political scientist.¹⁴

Third, South Asian Muslims offer new and relatively fresh political opportunities for Muslims in America and there is (again) a proud historical precedent that can be stressed. Participation in American political life was a goal for the pre-1965 South Asian immigrants, and after the Luce-Celler bill made them eligible for citizenship in 1946, the Punjabi pioneers helped elect Dalip Singh Saund from California's Imperial Valley in 1956, the first Congressman from India (and from Asia, in fact).¹⁵ After some hesitation, the post-1965 immigrants, including Muslims, also are plunging into American politics. Those migrating from South Asia are becoming naturalized U.S. citizens, although until 2004 Indians had to give up their Indian citizenship to do so (India did not allow dual citizenship but Pakistan did). South Asian Muslims are active in both Democratic and Republican party political funding and campaigning, and some, as already mentioned, are organizing on the basis of religion and trying to mobilize a Muslim bloc vote for whichever party seems more promising on issues of interest to them.

South Asian Muslims are relatively unstereotyped in American political life. Most Arab Muslims have taken strong stances in opposition to American policy in the Middle East and are now the targets of abuse and prejudice provoked by 9/11. The African American Muslims, originally separatist in orientation and still often ambivalent toward or critical of the U.S. government, also have a somewhat negative political profile in the public mind, mainly because of Louis Farrakhan's small but high-profile Nation of Islam. African American Muslims, in justifying their somewhat different beliefs and practices, point to the tensions throughout the

Islamic world between asabiya and umma, between particular communities of Muslims and an idealized universal community,¹⁶ and Muslims from South Asia are probably better able than Arabs to understand this approach to diversity. South Asian Muslims provide a new group, an intermediary or bridging group, both among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims.

South Asian Muslim politicians have put, or have been able to put, more emphasis upon domestic than foreign policy issues as they enter the American political arena, breaking the domination of American Muslim politics by the longstanding and probably harmful Arab emphasis on the Israel-Palestine conflict. With globalization, South Asians can certainly maintain links to their homeland as well as Arabs can, but they may be less inclined to do so. This is a matter of political priorities, whether to emphasize the transnational networks and politics “back home” or to build strong roots in America. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, economic and political problems loom large, and in India Muslims are too often at a political disadvantage; the immigrants invest less financial and emotional capital in their homelands. There are certainly tensions among South Asian Muslims in the U.S., as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are often at odds with each other in South Asia. Yet the Kashmir issue, for example, while it divides Indian and Pakistani Muslims from each other, has not been a high-profile issue in American Muslim politics.¹⁷ Also, in the U.S. South Asian Muslims are pushed together by the Hindutva or “Indic civilizational” movements that attack Muslims and Christians as foreigners in India. Furthermore, South Asian Muslims have the option of joining Asian American political coalitions, pan-ethnic coalitions that are becoming very important in some regions of the U.S. Thus South Asian Muslims offer less polarization and broader constituencies to the evolving American Muslim community.

Fourth, I would argue that South Asian Muslims are more flexible than Arabs on social issues important to American individualism, to concepts of freedom and individual autonomy. Viewed negatively by many immigrants as immoral egoism and societal breakdown, individualism is a core value in the U.S.; the valorization of individual freedom and choice pervades American culture.¹⁸ Muslim children growing up in the U.S. are being strongly influenced by this, and young Muslims are formulating versions of Islam that emphasize individual choices. Young women choose whether or not to put on the hijab without regard for family or homeland customs, and young men and women use Islamic texts to argue for their own choices of marriage partners.¹⁹

Admittedly, the evidence for greater South Asian Muslim flexibility on social issues is mixed: for example, Muslim women of all backgrounds are participating in a gender jihād, particularly in the scholarly arena.²⁰ However, while young Muslim women of all backgrounds may be veiling or wearing the hijab these days, in my classes most of those who do so are of Arab background. There are indications that South Asian mosques are the strictest in terms in gender segregation,²¹ yet when it comes to challenging male leadership and regulations in the mosques,²² South Asian women are prominent. A woman of Indian origin, Asra Nomani, whose mother ran a boutique in West Virginia and whose father helped start an Islamic Center there, not only has led a mosque walk-in of her family members but a highly publicized walk-in of several other Muslim women leaders (women born in India, Syria, and two American-born women, one Arab and one African American). This last event, in June, 2004, marked the founding of a new national Muslim women's organization, The Daughters of Hajar, dedicated to gaining greater rights for Muslim women in American Muslim arenas.

South Asian Muslims may also be more open to discussion of sexual issues, including homosexuality. Some scholars of Arabs and Arab Americans seem to think this is so, and a few have told me they assumed the young leaders of American Muslim gay and lesbian movements (Al-Fatiha, Queer Jihad, also Trikone) were South Asian.²³ We have an outspoken book by a Pakistani-origin gay man and a book and several articles by young Muslim lesbians of both Pakistani and Indian backgrounds.²⁴ Muslim WakeUp with its feature “Sex and the Umma,” HijabMan’s Blog, and other such material on the web seems produced mainly by writers of South Asian origin.²⁵ On the other hand, the Progressive Muslims organization formed in November of 2004 is led by four young Arab Americans.²⁶

To conclude, I have tried to show that South Asian Muslims contribute significantly to American Muslim, and ultimately to American, politics and social life in four ways. First, early missionaries from India established an important linkage with indigenous, African American Muslims. Second, the more recent, post-1965 South Asian Muslim immigrants brought ambitious new leadership to the developing American Muslim religious and political organizations, leadership well qualified by education and experience with democratic politics to jump into American politics. Third, South Asian Muslims are relatively new on the political scene and can build bridges among Muslims and to the broader American public; they are not handicapped by association with the Israel/Palestine conflict or the somewhat separatist versions of African American Islam. Fourth, I have suggested that South Asian Muslims may offer a middle way when it comes to controversial social issues, that the religious and cultural pluralism historically found in South Asia contributes to more positive immigrant Muslim engagements with American individualism and the directions in which western societies are moving.

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1. Karen Isaksen Leonard, "American Muslims: Race, Religion and the Nation," ISIM Newsletter (June 2004), 16-17.
 2. The term South Asia includes people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldiv Islands, and even, according to some, Afghanistan.
 3. One estimate puts African Americans at 42%, South Asians at 24.4%, and Arabs at 12.4% (with smaller groups of Africans at 6.2%, Iranians at 3.6%, Southeast Asians at 2%, European Americans at 1.6%, and "other" at 5.4%). Another estimate puts "Americans" at 30%, Arabs at 33%, and South Asians at 29%. Estimates of U.S. Muslims range from three to eight million. For the first breakdown, see Fareed H. Nu'man, The Muslim Population in the United States (Washington D.C.: American Muslim Council, 1992), 16; for the second, Ilyas Ba-Yunus and M. Moin Siddiqui, A Report on the Muslim Population in the United States New York: CAMRI, 1999).
 4. See Ernest Allen, Jr., "Identity and Destiny: The Formative Views of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam," eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, Muslims on the Americanization Path? (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 201-266.
 5. The Ahmadis were regarded as Muslims in the U.S. by both African American and immigrant Muslims well into the 1960s. C. Eric Lincoln found that, in 1960, "the Ahmadiyah were generally accepted as a legitimate sect of Islam": The Black Muslims in America (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 221. One can point to problems with alleged Ahmadi doctrines and practices (whether the Ahmadis consider their founder a Prophet or not is contested, and there are differences among Ahmadis too). Yet the Ahmadis were only outlawed in Pakistan after the third of three court cases. The two earlier decisions, based on the same body of textual material as the third, did not find them unorthodox, and the third decision was reached only under extreme political pressure. Tayyab Mahmud shows the political forces behind all three decisions: "Freedom of Religion and Religious Minorities in Pakistan: a Study of Judicial Practice," Fordham International Law Journal 19:1 (Oct. 1995), 40-100.
 6. Kathleen M. Moore shows that long-standing African American efforts to secure legal rights and access to societal resources are benefitting the immigrant Muslims and helping Muslim identities become part of the range of American mainstream identities: Al-Mughtaribun: American Law and the Transformation of Muslim Life in the United States (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
 7. Karen Leonard, "South Asian Leadership of American Muslims," in ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens: (Oxford: 2002), 233-249.
 8. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act took effect in 1968: see Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans: An Interpretive History (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 145-165. The "old" immigrants,

chiefly Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim men from India's Punjab province along the northwestern frontier where the Punjabi language was spoken, were from farming backgrounds and settled in California in the early 1900s, establishing families with women of Mexican background. Asian Indians like other Asians suffered from discriminatory immigration and citizenship laws until the 1946 Luce-Celler Bill gave Asian Indians the right to become naturalized U.S. See Karen Isaksen Leonard, Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

9. Muslims are a majority in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. Pakistan and Bangladesh have become vulnerable to Islamic factionalism since their independence, Pakistan moving against the Ahmadis and also against Shias and perhaps the Nizari Ismailis or Aga Khanis now. Bangladesh also seems to be moving against the Ahmadis.

10. The high socioeconomic standards were set by the first wave of post-1965 immigrants, while those arriving since the mid-1980s have brought the averages and medians down somewhat. Many of these later arrivals come in under the Family Reunification Act and are not so well qualified; there have also been recessions in the US economy. The Immigration Act of 1990 reversed this downward trend, since it sharply increased the numbers of highly-skilled immigrants from India (and Asia generally) at the expense of unskilled workers and non-employed immigrants (parents and spouses of citizens).

11. For the 4% figure, India West, Feb. 26, 1993; for the AAPI, India Today, Aug. 15, 1994, 481. Omar Khalidi did a count from the Foreign Medical Graduates (American Medical Association, 1990 (data from 1986) and found that 922 of the 17,991 graduates from India then were Muslims: "Indian Muslim Physicians in the United States," Azan (New York), May 1990.

12. The infusion of Saudi and Arab money and Arabic-speaking imams may have led to a gradual assumption of control of some South Asian-initiated mosques by Arab Muslims: this needs to be investigated.

¹³. Karen Isaksen Leonard, Muslims in the United States: the State of Research (New York: Russell Sage, 2003), 20-21, 91-92.

¹⁴. Leonard, Muslims in the United States, Appendix 2, 20; for the 2004 American Muslim Taskforce on Civil Rights and Election 2004, a good background story is Lisette B. Poole, "Role of Muslim Task Force in Presidential Election," Pakistan Link, September 3, 2004, 37.

15. See Dalip Singh Saund, Congressman From India (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1960).

16. Aminah Beverly McCloud, African American Islam (New York: Routledge, 1995), particularly the conclusion and 4-5; Richard Brent Turner outlines and stresses differences from immigrant Muslims: Islam in the African-American Experience (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1997).

17. Prema Kurien, "To Be Or Not To Be South Asian," Journal of Asian American Studies 6:3 (October 2003), 261-288.

18. Many such issues involve gender concepts shared by African American Muslims, some authors argue. See Carolyn Moxley Rouse, Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Robert Dannin, Black Pilgrimage to Islam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Aminah Beverly McCloud, African American Islam (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁹. See the April 2005 issue of Muslim World for a series of articles on American Muslim youth.

20. See Amina Wadud, Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gisela Webb, ed., Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America (NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Omar Safi, ed., Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003).

21. According to Ihsan Bagby's 2004 survey, A Portrait of Detroit Mosques: Muslim Views on Policy, Politics and Religion (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, Clinton Township, Michigan), South Asian mosques are the most restrictive and African American mosques are the most open with respect to women's issues like seating and service on governing boards (20).

22. Laurie Goodstein, "Muslim Women Seeking a Place in the Mosque," New York Times, July 22, 2004, A1, A16. ISNA took a poll in 2003 that showed improving mosque leadership, especially on gender issues, was the members' first priority.

23. Certainly the recent prosecution of gay men in Egypt contrasts with the relative permissiveness toward gays and lesbians in most of South Asia (this note could become an article in itself).

24. See Leonard, Muslims in the United States, 125, for references; also Irshad Manji, The Trouble with Islam: a Wakeup Call for Honesty and Change (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2004).

25. [Http://muslimwakeup.com](http://muslimwakeup.com), [Http://www.hijabman.com](http://www.hijabman.com).

²⁶. See Progressivemuslims.com. These speculations on my part may have more to do with my own selective reading of the still-fragmentary literature in this area.